

“You shall be only above and you shall not be below.” (28:13)

The Kotzker Rebbe, z.l., adds a new twist to the meaning of this blessing. He explains that Hashem created a ladder upon which the neshamos, souls, from the olam ha'elyon, upper/eternal world, descend to This World into the body of a human being. It is similar to the sulam mutzav artzah, v'rosho magia shomaymah, “ladder standing (with its legs) on this earth and its head/summit reaches Heavenward” (Bereishis 28:12) that Yaakov Avinu visualized in his dream. As soon as the neshamah descends, the ladder is removed. From Heaven, the call goes out to the neshamah, “Return! Return!” The neshamah, of course, wants to return to its Heavenly origin, striving to go back to its source, but there is no ladder.

There are three groups of neshamos. One group gives up immediately and has no desire to return to Heaven. It becomes comfortable in its earthly setting, acclimating itself to its human abode. The second group does make an effort to return. It leaps; it attempts to soar; it goes backward slightly, digs in, and attempts to “take off,” but it is unsuccessful. Regrettably, it can only handle a limited amount of failure. It finally surrenders to its earthly nature and settles in.

The third group does not give up. Failure is not a word in its lexicon. After every “setback,” it rejuvenates itself. With hope and increased vigor, it tries again. What makes that group different from the others? It hears the voice of Heaven calling, “Return! Return!” As long as one hears that Heavenly voice, there can be no rest in This World. After a while, Hashem turns to the soul that did not give up and He lifts it up: “One who comes to purify himself is helped.” Divine assistance is available for the individual who truly seeks to overcome the obstacles and challenges that stand in his way. The level to which each neshamah ascends is commensurate with its perseverance and desire to retrieve its original position. This provides a new perspective on the meaning of “above” and “below.” Regrettably, some of us identify with a different concept of “above” and “below.”